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# French Grammar Basics and Beyond

Easy Explanations in English of French Grammar  
with 200 Exercises and Solutions

Céline Van Loan  
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*By learning a new language I discover mine,  
I analyse it more, I understand much better  
my own grammar.*

Nancy Huston  
is a Canadian novelist who writes  
primarily in French and translates  
her own works into English

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## FOREWORD

### Why a French grammar book in English?

While writing this French grammar book, I put myself in our students' shoes who needed to grasp the complexities of the grammar. Many of them came to us nervous about the idea of having to learn it. French grammar should not be a stumbling block to learning the language, and one way to get over the fear is to teach it with easy and straightforward explanations.

Most grammar books are in French, which can be quite challenging or discouraging. Therefore, I wanted to write an attractive and accessible grammar reference in English for our students in order to facilitate comprehension.

We included most of the answers to the exercises at the end of book. We could not add the answers to all the questions, especially to the ones that ask the students to answer freely or to translate some sentences.

This French basic grammar book is intended for beginner to intermediate learners (French levels from A1 to B1). The objective is for the students to learn and exercise their understanding of the basic elements of the language as well as some cultural aspects. Step by step, together with a teacher or on their own, French learners can construct the sentences and gain plenty of practice.

A first edition was published in 2011. This is a new revised edition.

Céline Van Loan

## 1. *Bonjour !*

### *Bonjour, bonsoir...*

When you walk into a boutique or a small shop in France, the people in the place will acknowledge you by saying **bonjour** (all day) or **bonsoir** (after 6:00 p.m.). Of course, in return you should do the same. If you walk into a place filled with women only, you could say *Bonjour Mesdames*, in a place filled with men and women *Bonjour Mesdames et Messieurs* (or simply *Messieurs-dames*). If you're facing one person only, it is customary to say *Bonjour Monsieur* or *Bonjour Madame*, if you're greeting a younger female person (18 years or less), you should say *Bonjour Mademoiselle*.

### *Au revoir, bonne journée, bonne soirée, bonne nuit...*

When you leave a shop or a restaurant during the day, you should always automatically say **au revoir** (good bye) or **bonne journée** (have a good day!). In the evening, you must say **bonne soirée** (good evening). And when you leave someone at night, you say **bonne nuit** (good night).

### *À bientôt, à plus tard !...*

Here is a list of common expressions you say when you leave people, and when to use them:

–**À bientôt !** = See you soon! Used when you are going to see that person again one day but you're not sure when! The equivalent of "see you later."

–**À samedi, à mercredi, à ce soir, à demain, à la semaine prochaine, à demain soir, à midi**, etc. = See you Saturday, Wednesday, tonight, tomorrow, next week, tomorrow evening, at lunch time, etc. When you are indicating the specific day and time when you will meet again, just start the phrase with **à** + any specific day or time.

–**À tout à l'heure !** = See you later today! It is said when you are going to see that person again in just a few hours within that same day. The younger kids and adults may just say **à tout'** and will pronounce the *t* at the end of the word.

–**À plus tard !** = See you later! It is used when you are unsure if you're going to see that person again or not but most likely will. The younger kids and adults may just say **à plus** and will pronounce the *s* at the end of the word. In text messages (sms), they simply write: **À+**.

–**À une prochaine !** = See you next time! Same as above.

–**À un de ces quatre !** = See you one of these days! You use it when you are not sure when you will see someone again.

### *Les bises (kisses on the cheek)*

Until recently, each time you encountered someone you know, you had to be prepared to give two to four *bises* to the other person. However, since the social distancing imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic, this habit is evolving, and who knows what will happen in the future?

## EXERCISE

What do you say:

1. When you enter a *boulangerie* in the morning? \_\_\_\_\_
2. When you enter a *fromagerie* in which the *fromagère* (a woman) is alone? \_\_\_\_\_
3. When you enter a bank in which you are welcomed by the *banquier* (a man)? \_\_\_\_\_
4. When you leave a friend that you will meet again in the afternoon? \_\_\_\_\_
5. When you enter a café in the evening? \_\_\_\_\_
6. When you leave a shop during the day? \_\_\_\_\_
7. When you leave a teacher that you will meet again the following Wednesday? \_\_\_\_\_
8. When you leave a restaurant at the end of the afternoon? \_\_\_\_\_
9. When you leave your friends at night before going home to bed? \_\_\_\_\_
10. When you leave a colleague that you will see very soon? \_\_\_\_\_

## 2. Spelling and the alphabet

It is important to first learn the alphabet to the point where you can easily spell your contact details. The exercises have to be done orally with your teacher.

### EXERCISES

1) Say the alphabet to the teacher:

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

2) Spell the following words:

Maison

Architecte

Rasoir

Queue

Grange

Rêve

Bouteille

Bâtir

Vendre

Courir

3) Difficult syllables with the vowels – Learn to pronounce the following to your teacher:

**eu:** jeune; bleu

**ui:** oui; puits

**au:** automne; faux

**ou:** roux; loup

**an:** maman; charmant

**on:** ronde; longue

**en:** vent; lentille

**eau:** chapeau; tableau

**ain:** pain; vain

**oi:** poisson; croire

**in:** vin; malin

### 3. Être (to be)

The verb *être* is an irregular verb. Study and memorize the way it is conjugated according to the different subject pronouns:

First let's learn what the subject pronouns are:

**Je** = I

**Tu** = You (the familiar form)

**Il** = He

**Elle** = She

**On** = One/We (more informal than using *nous*)

**Nous** = We

**Vous** = You (plural form)

**Ils** = They (masculine)

**Elles** = They (feminine)

**Note:** A mixed group of males and females is referred to as masculine, even if there are 10 women and only one man. You will have to use *ils*.

#### *Tu* and *vous*

There are two different words to express "you" in French: *tu* and *vous*.

**Tu is the familiar "you."** It expresses a certain closeness and informality. Use *tu* when speaking to a friend, a colleague, a relative or a child.

Example:

*Salut Jean, tu es content d'être en vacances ?* = Hi, Jean, are you happy to be on holidays?

**Vous is the formal form of "you."** It is used when one has to express respect or in formal situations.

Example:

*Bonjour Monsieur Desbois, vous êtes ici pour quelques semaines ?* = Good morning Mr Desbois, you are here for a few weeks?

#### The conjugation of *être*

*Je suis.* = I am. *Tu es.* = You are. *Il/elle/on est.* = He/she/one is (or: we are; see next page).

*Nous sommes.* = We are. *Vous êtes.* = You are. *Ils/elles sont.* = They are. **C'est** = This is.

## ***On and nous***

**There are 2 ways to express "we" = *on* or *nous*. *On* is more casual than *nous*.** The French have a tendency of using "*on*" more than "*nous*" in the everyday language. It is conjugated at the 3<sup>rd</sup> person just like *il* or *elle*.

Example:

*Avec mes copains, on est allés au cinéma hier.* = With my friends, we went to the movies yesterday.

***On* also means "one" or "everyone."** It is used when expressing facts, generalities or obligations.

Examples:

*En France, on boit un apéritif avant le repas.* = in France, one (we) drinks an aperitif before the meal.

*On doit avoir un visa de travail pour travailler en France.* = One (we) must have a work visa to work in France.

## ***Les nationalités (Nationalities)***

**Nouns and adjectives of nationality agree with the gender and the plural** (feminine/masculine, singular/plural); if the subject is feminine, you need to add an **e** to the nationality and if the subject is plural, you need to add an **s**.

Examples:

*Elle est française.* = She is French.

*Il est anglais.* = He is English.

*Nous sommes américaines.* = We are American (females).

*Elles sont anglaises.* = They are English (females).

*Ils sont anglais.* = They are English (males).

## ***Quelques adjectifs (A few adjectives)***

**An adjective is a word that describes a noun or a pronoun.** In French, an adjective is usually placed after the noun, except for the shorter ones. **Just like nationalities, they must agree with the gender and the plural\*.**

Examples of adjectives:

***petit*** = small/short

***grand*** = tall

***content*** = happy

***drôle*** = funny

***triste*** = sad

***méchant*** = mean

***marié*** = married

***fatigué*** = tired

\*In most cases, the feminine form of the adjective is formed by adding an **"e"**.



**The plural is formed by adding an "s."**

Examples:

*Mon mari est grand.* = My husband is tall.

*Ma femme est grande.* = My wife is tall.

*Mes enfants sont grands.* = My children are tall.

*Mes filles sont grandes.* = My daughters are tall.

**With some adjectives, the feminine form is irregular.**

Examples:

*beau* becomes *belle* = handsome, beautiful

*mignon* becomes *mignonne* = cute

*gentil* becomes *gentille* = nice

*gros* becomes *grosse* = big, fat.

You'll learn more about the adjectives on page 81.

## **The more usual negative construction (*ne... pas*)**

In order to make a sentence negative, you need to add *ne* and *pas* around the verb.

Example:

*Je ne suis pas grande.* = I am not tall.

**Note:** in everyday speech the French will often drop the *ne*: *Je suis pas grande.*

You'll learn more about the negative forms on page 102.

## EXERCISES

1) Fill in the blanks with the proper form of the verb *être* :

1. Bonjour, je \_\_\_\_\_ Caroline Dupuy.
2. Et vous ? Qui \_\_\_\_\_ vous ?
3. Bonjour, je \_\_\_\_\_ Roger Carlson !
4. Je \_\_\_\_\_ belge.
5. Et vous, \_\_\_\_\_ vous anglais ?
6. Non, je \_\_\_\_\_ canadien.

2) Translate the following sentences into French:

1. I am tired = \_\_\_\_\_
2. I am happy = \_\_\_\_\_
3. You are busy (*tu* form) = \_\_\_\_\_
4. I am not Irish = \_\_\_\_\_
5. You are not English (*vous* form) = \_\_\_\_\_
6. I am a student = \_\_\_\_\_
7. We are married = \_\_\_\_\_
8. He is nice = \_\_\_\_\_
9. She is short = \_\_\_\_\_
10. They are tall = \_\_\_\_\_
11. She is funny = \_\_\_\_\_
12. They are cute = \_\_\_\_\_

3) Complete the following sentence by filling in the blanks with the proper form of the verb *être* :

Paul \_\_\_\_\_ grand, il \_\_\_\_\_ sympa et il \_\_\_\_\_ professeur d'anglais. Je \_\_\_\_\_ son meilleur ami.  
Nous \_\_\_\_\_ dans la même école. Paul \_\_\_\_\_ français, il n'\_\_\_\_\_ pas dans ma classe, il  
\_\_\_\_\_ le grand frère de Camille. Il \_\_\_\_\_ très gentil et drôle, je \_\_\_\_\_ heureux d'\_\_\_\_\_ son  
ami.

4) What is the nationality and occupation of the following people? (Write out complete sentences):

*Example: Céline/française/professeure de français: Céline est Française et elle est professeure de français.*

1. Pierre/suisse/chanteur: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Yves/français/cuisinier: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Vous/chinois/photographe: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Caroline/italienne/professeure: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Nous/russes/mannequins: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Ils/espagnols/maçons: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Vous/indien/informaticien: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Tu/américain/homme d'affaires: \_\_\_\_\_
9. Elle/suédoise/pharmacienne: \_\_\_\_\_
10. Marc/belge/dessinateur: \_\_\_\_\_

5) Answer the following questions:

1. Vous êtes grand(e) ou petit(e) ? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Vous êtes blond(e) ou brun(e) ? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Vous êtes marié(e) ou célibataire ? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Vous êtes étudiant(e) ou professeur(e) ? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Vous êtes sportif(ve) ou artiste ? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Vous êtes drôle ou sérieux(se) ? \_\_\_\_\_

6) Make the following sentences negative:

1. Je suis dans le jardin. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Vous êtes américain. \_\_\_\_\_
3. Je suis grand. \_\_\_\_\_
4. Elle est blonde. \_\_\_\_\_
5. Tu es dans le nord de la France. \_\_\_\_\_
6. Vous êtes à l'école. \_\_\_\_\_
7. Nous sommes écossais. \_\_\_\_\_

8. Il est intelligent. \_\_\_\_\_
9. Je suis avocat. \_\_\_\_\_
10. Je suis célibataire. \_\_\_\_\_
11. Nous sommes divorcés. \_\_\_\_\_
12. Il est sympa. \_\_\_\_\_
13. Elles sont ici ! \_\_\_\_\_

7) Translate the following sentences into French:

1. They are not happy (men). \_\_\_\_\_
2. We are not happy (men and women). \_\_\_\_\_
3. I am not short (woman). \_\_\_\_\_
4. I am not short, I am tall (a man is speaking). \_\_\_\_\_
5. I am not short, I am tall (a woman is speaking). \_\_\_\_\_
6. We are not short (men). \_\_\_\_\_
7. We are not sad, we are happy (men and women). \_\_\_\_\_
8. They are not shy (men). \_\_\_\_\_
9. They are not shy (women). \_\_\_\_\_
10. You are not glad (men, plural). \_\_\_\_\_
11. You are not glad (woman, singular). \_\_\_\_\_
12. He is not tired. \_\_\_\_\_
13. They are not tired (men). \_\_\_\_\_
14. I am not blond, but (*mais*) I am brown (woman). \_\_\_\_\_

8) Complete the following sentences with the feminine equivalent:

*Example: Marc est un artiste américain. Lucy \_\_\_\_\_*

*Lucy est une artiste américaine.*

1. Monsieur Yamamoto est un client important. Madame Lauder \_\_\_\_\_
2. Gérard est un acteur français. Sophie \_\_\_\_\_
3. Carlos est un chanteur cubain. Célia \_\_\_\_\_
4. Paolo est un champion de ski italien. Anna \_\_\_\_\_
5. Thomas Dutronc est un chanteur français célèbre. Mylène Farmer \_\_\_\_\_

## ***C'est vs Il est***

To introduce or present something or a person, the French will use either *c'est* (this is), *il/elle est* (he/it/she is).

The plural of *c'est* is *ce sont* = these are.

The plural of *il/elle est* is *ils/elles sont* = they are.

The negative form of *c'est* is = *ce n'est pas* (singular); *ce ne sont pas* (plural) = these aren't.

The negative form of *il/elle est* is *ils/elles ne sont pas* = they aren't.

The choice between *c'est* or *il est* is not always straightforward. Most of the time, *c'est* or *ce sont* are followed by a noun (*c'est une voiture allemande* = it's a German car; *c'est un livre* = it's a book; *c'est Julien* = it's Julien).

**Note:** *Il/elle* is usually followed with an adjective (see below).

**In order to make sure that it's clear, let's understand in which situations we use one or the other:**

### ***C'est* is used:**

#### **1) To identify or introduce a person or a thing**

Examples:

– *Qu'est-ce que c'est ?* = What is it?

*C'est un arbre exotique.* = It is an exotic tree (identifying something).

– *Qui est-ce ?* = Who is it?

*C'est Charles, mon ami.* = This is Charles, my friend (introducing someone).

– *Qui sont-ils ?* = Who are they?

*Ce sont des Américains.* = They are Americans.

#### **2) To announce oneself (for example on the telephone)**

Examples:

*Allo, c'est Carole !* = Hello, this is Carole!

*Est-ce que c'est Carl ?* = Is it Carl?

– *Non, ce n'est pas Carl !* = No, it is not Carl!

#### **3) To make a general statement**

Examples:

*Les vacances, c'est bien !* = Holidays, they're great!

*Le travail, c'est difficile !* = Work, it's difficult!

**Note:** If you have a possessive adjective such as *mon, ma, mes*, then you would always use *c'est*:

***C'est mon*** chien. = This is my dog.

***C'est ma*** voiture. = This is my car.

### ***Il/elle est*** is used:

#### **1) To describe something or someone in particular.**

**Note:** *il/elle* is usually followed by an adjective.

Examples:

*Carine ? Elle est grande, blonde et intelligente.* = Carine? She is tall, blond hair and intelligent.

*Il est sympa, le professeur.* = He is nice, the teacher.

#### **2) When talking about someone's profession, nationality, religion or family status.** In this case, you don't add an article (take out the *un, une, des, le, la, les*).

Examples:

*Carla ? Elle est informaticienne.* = Carla is a computer specialist.

*Elle est française.* = She is French.

*Elle est célibataire.* = She is single.

*Il est catholique.* = He's catholic.

BUT you will **add an article if you add a descriptive adjective:**

*Elle est une informaticienne intelligente.* = She is an intelligent computer specialist.

*Il est un écrivain célèbre.* = He is a famous writer.

**Note:** In French, when **the nationality is a substantive, we start it with a capital letter, but we don't do it when it is an adjective.** When speaking about a French man or a French woman, you just say: *un Français, une Française*. **You don't need to specify *un homme français* or *une femme française*.**

Examples:

*L'homme qui a obtenu ce travail est français.* = The man who got that job is French.

*C'est un Français qui a obtenu ce travail.* = It is a Frenchman who got that job.

*Cette femme qui fait la pizza ce soir est italienne.* = This woman who makes the pizza tonight is Italian.

*Ce soir, la pizza est préparée par une italienne.* = Tonight, the pizza is prepared by an Italian woman.

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